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ABSTRACT

This booklet touches on many topics related to child care consumer education for parents. The booklet begins by defining child care consumer education, discussing this education as a way to provide parents with child care information to assess their needs, locate services, evaluate quality, and choose the best possible care for their children. The booklet asserts that parents need information, personal attention, and access to support during the process of choosing child care. The booklet describes Child Care Aware, a national initiative to provide information about child care to parents, and also describes Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs). The second section of the booklet, "What States Are Doing," describes how several states have used Child Development Block Grants to develop innovative consumer education initiatives. The booklet concludes with a list of national organizations working in the area of child care consumer education. (EV)

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REACHING PARENTS WITH CHILD CARE CONSUMER EDUCATION

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U.S. Department of
Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Child Care Bureau

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Reaching Parents

With Child Care Consumer Education

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What is Child Care Consumer Education?

Especially in this day and age when most parents work, nothing is more important than finding child care that is affordable, accessible and safe.

- President Bill Clinton, October 23, 1997

Families need quality, affordable child care so that they can succeed as parents and as workers. Child care consumer education provides parents with child care information to assess their needs, locate services, evaluate quality, and choose the best possible care for their children. The ability to select high quality arrangements from an array of choices is essential. Since parents of all incomes are using child care in increasing numbers, one-on-one consumer education and multi-media public awareness campaigns are critical to improving access to quality, affordable care. The development of effective consumer education initiatives involves input and feedback from the consumer -- the parent.

We...know how important it is to ensure choice for parents in their selection of child care. One size fits all child care does not fit America's families. We don't work the same hours, we don't have the same economic or other kinds of pressures that we're dealing with, so we have to provide more options and we have to empower parents with good information to enable them to become good consumers.

- First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, October 23, 1997

Parents across the country report difficulties accessing child care. In 1996, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies found that 62 percent of working parents report major problems finding quality child care to meet their needs.

The availability of child care varies from community to community and by the type of care needed. In one study, 88 percent of the available spaces in centers in low-income communities were filled (Ross, 1996). Child care may also be especially difficult to find in rural communities, where there are fewer centers or family child care providers and where available caregivers may not be near a family's home or workplace. Compounding these scarcities are difficulties encountered by parents looking for care for infants and toddlers, school-age children, during nontraditional hours and for children with special needs. The General Accounting Office found in 1997 that "the largest gaps between known supply and demand in the poor areas of the selected sites exist for infants, school-aged children or both."

Good consumer education is critical to making the market function properly. If parents are not able to make informed choices, their access to the

> *market is limited. Further, if parents demand safe and quality care, providers are more likely to supply it.* (Office of the Inspector General, US Department of Health and Human Services)

Research with parent focus groups has found that this consumer decision is challenging for many families because:

- ✦ parents may feel isolated when looking for child care and report that they usually do not know what they are looking for at the outset of their search;
- ✦ most parents are not aware of the availability of child care resource and referral services; and
- ✦ many parents cannot afford quality care, even if it is available.

To face these challenges and make informed choices about child care, parents need support as they begin the process of choosing and evaluating care for their children. This support includes information, personal attention, and access to financial assistance.

INFORMATION. Parents need information to make the best decision for their children's care, including:

- ✦ What child care arrangements are available, and how to identify the elements that ensure the health and safety of the children.
- ✦ Strategies to develop a partnership with the caregiver.
- ✦ Opportunities to observe, evaluate, and stay actively involved.

PERSONAL ATTENTION. As parents seek child care, the opportunity to have one-on-one discussions with a referral counselor is important to ensure that the information provided is tailored to the unique needs of each family.

Child Care Aware is a national initiative to provide information about child care to parents. The mission of Child Care Aware is to ensure that every parent has access to good information about finding quality child care and resources in their community through national consumer marketing and by raising the visibility of local child care resource and referral agencies.

Child Care Aware has identified eight key principles for designing effective child care consumer education efforts at the state and local levels. Successful project designs include:

- ✦ outreach to targeted audiences;
- ✦ respect for parents' perspectives;
- ✦ feedback from consumers;
- ✦ the importance of trust;
- ✦ an understanding of adult learning;
- ✦ linkages between consumer education and other family issues;
- ✦ engaging community partners; and
- ✦ partnerships that build upon the strengths of resource and referral programs and public agencies that serve low-income parents.

Child Care Aware is an initiative managed by the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) with the Child Care Action Campaign and the National Association for Family Child Care as advisory partners.

ACCESS TO SUPPORT. Information about child care subsidies at the state and local level, materials about the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit can help parents afford the care of their choice.

Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs) can support families by connecting them to the information they need, while providing one-on-one counseling opportunities to help them choose quality care for their children. According to the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA), community based CCR&Rs:

- ✦ support families in the most important roles of nurturing their children and balancing the demands of family and work;
- ✦ compile, analyze, and share information with parents, child care providers, and communities;
- ✦ support individuals and programs that care for children; and
- ✦ build connections in communities and states to create appropriate policies on family and children's issues and to generate additional resources for child care.

Bright Dreams: A Child Care Consumer Education Program Reaching Parents-to-Be and New Parents

Programs for Parents, a child care resource and referral agency in NEW JERSEY, is implementing a Child Care Aware consumer education program focused on parents-in-waiting and new parents. The program conveys a message about quality child care to parents attending Lamaze method and parenting classes, and through closed-circuit television in the maternity departments of four large hospitals in Essex County, New Jersey.

Programs for Parents, in collaboration with the Newark Office for Children and the County of Essex, designed the program to reach parents when they are the most receptive to this information, in the late stage of their pregnancy or just after the birth of their baby. The Bright Dreams program presents a brief video showing scenes of quality child care activities and programs. The video includes segments with parents describing why they chose their caregiver, along with charts of what is important to look for when seeking quality care. Accompanying the video is a newsletter published in English and Spanish that provides information about quality and a checklist for evaluating infant care options.

A draft version of the video was presented to several groups of parents, family child care providers, staff members, and the hospital committee. The producers also attended the meeting, to be responsive to suggestions. Input from providers and parents was also incorporated into the newsletter and checklist.

The Bright Dreams program includes a media campaign that includes public service announcements, press releases, and bus advertisements. Campaign materials are produced in both English and Spanish. Local television stations that broadcast to a primarily Latino audience have expressed interest in designing a program around the video. Cable television stations have expressed similar interest.

What States Are Doing

The Child and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) is the major source of federal funding to the States to help low-income parents find and afford child care. Under the CCDBG, States are required to certify that they will "promote informed child care choices." Additionally, the CCDBG legislation includes a set aside of not less than 4 percent of total funds for activities that are "designed to provide comprehensive consumer education to parents and the public, activities that increase parental choice, and activities designed to improve the quality and availability of child care (such as resource and referral services)."

This requirement has led to innovative new consumer education initiatives across the country. Many states have begun efforts to integrate the child care subsidy application process with consumer education programs. CCDBG funds have supported the efforts of community agencies such as child care resource and referral agencies to inform parents about available child care services. These efforts have increased the child care consumer education services available to low-income families, and have created new opportunities to tell families about child care assistance available through subsidy programs.

When a parent is enrolled in the child care subsidy program in CALIFORNIA, he/she is asked if a child care provider has been selected. If they have not selected a child care provider, they are referred to the local resource and referral program. The resource and referral agency provides counseling on how to select a child care provider that best meets the family's needs, and a list of providers for the family to visit. California has legislated that child care resource and referral staff be co-located in each county welfare office in order to provide consumer education and referrals to parents. Multimillion dollar funding for this new initiative is part of the Governor's budget.

However, some barriers continue to exist that interfere with the development of strong consumer education networks. The Office of the Inspector General, in a 1998 report, found that "most [States] were not able to provide sufficient consumer education." Similar obstacles were found across the states, including:

- ✦ large caseloads and long waiting lists, impeding community agencies' ability to regularly provide services beyond eligibility determination and payment;
- ✦ multiple functions of child care resource and referral agencies, including separate subsidy and education components that do not interact to serve parents; and
- ✦ reliance on print materials as the primary means of communication with families.

According to a study by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., low-income families face severe constraints, including limited income, jobs with inflexible and nonstandard schedules, an insufficient supply of formal child care, and a lack of other adults in the household to assist with work and childrearing responsibilities. These constraints make the search for child care more difficult.

Quality of Care From a Parent's Point of View

Traditionally, in designing child care and family policy, everyone speaks for the child and for the parents -- except perhaps the parents themselves. OREGON is setting a place at the table for the child care consumer by trying to help parents find their voice and articulate their vital interests in public policy through a coordinated effort at many levels. Efforts include:

- An on-going research project measuring quality of care from a parent's point of view and studying its policy correlates.
- The 20-member Achieving Quality for Children Policy Council, a vigorous parent group, has developed a brochure: "In a Parent's Voice: Tips from Parents to Parents, about Looking for Quality Child Care."
- A network of groups, task forces, research projects, and agencies cooperating in a loosely coordinated way to pursue common goals, in affiliation with the Oregon Child Care Research Partnership.
- The collection, analysis, and use of data on family and child care demographics to drive policy and planning.

(Quality of Care From a Parent's Point of View: A Place at the Policy Table for Child Care Consumers, Arthur Emlen, 1996 unpublished paper, Oregon Child Care Research Partnership, Portland, Oregon)

Recognizing that it is through a combination of individual consumer education and public awareness activities that parents will seek and assess child care, and eventually increase the demand for high quality care, states have adopted different strategies to help educate parents about their child care choices and the availability of subsidies. In some cases, they have established statewide networks of resource and referral agencies to insure that every parent in the state has a reliable resource to turn to for information about child care.

INDIANA has launched an initiative to enhance and expand statewide and local resource and referral activities. The primary services available to parents and community agencies will include information on the supply and availability of child care throughout the state, and consumer education and child care referrals for families. The goal is to create a system of consumer education and public awareness to encourage parents to seek, evaluate and eventually demand quality child care.

The *Child Care and Development Block Grant Report of State Plans* shows:

- ✦ More than one-quarter of the states use the media, mailings, brochures, posters, public service announcements and other mechanisms to alert parents to the availability of subsidized child care.
- ✦ Over half of the states provide materials to community agencies, local programs and child care providers and other state agencies to distribute information to the families they serve.
- ✦ Three-quarters of the states provide information on the availability of child care at the point of intake for families

applying for TANF.

✦ Almost two-thirds of the states use resource and referral agencies to provide information to families on the availability of child care subsidies and on the range of choices available to families.

Other states are using multi-media campaigns to make consumer education available 24 hours a day. Internet and other technologies have made this approach cost-effective and simple to implement.

NORTH CAROLINA, CALIFORNIA, NEW JERSEY and ILLINOIS are among the states using the World Wide Web as one means of delivering child care consumer education to families. Each state has several child care pages, including information on "What Parents Should Know about Child Care," searchable directories of regulated child care providers, how to participate in the child care subsidy program and a listing of local child care resource and referral agencies. Illinois includes information about standards for centers and family child care homes. Links to other organizations with information on finding and choosing child care are also included.

Community resource and referral agencies are also using technology to meet the diverse needs of families in multiple settings. In WASHINGTON state, Child Care Resources, the community resource and referral agency serving Seattle/King County, is using the Web to provide consumer education and referrals. This will soon be available statewide.

Many states have developed systems to bring consumer education to families applying for the child care subsidy. Co-location of these services at the time and place of application has helped

many states maximize the effectiveness of the consumer education services they provide.

In UTAH, the resource and referral agency has prepared a slide show and video for parents on how to choose child care, which are shown while families apply for the child care subsidy at the Employment Center. Pamphlets and books are also available. Families may also attend a workshop on "How to Choose Quality Child Care."

In other states, the resource and referral system is the central point of contact for families to access the child care subsidy program and consumer education. This integrated approach is designed to provide parents with easy access to resources, financial assistance, and counselors to support their child's needs. It is also used to support statewide public awareness campaigns to educate families, providers and employers about the importance of quality child care.

Child Care Management Agencies in ALABAMA, located in the community resource and referral agencies, provide consumer education and child care referral services to low-income families. They also process eligibility applications from families and process payments to providers.

The FLORIDA Children's Forum administers a statewide resource and referral network that oversees consumer education activities throughout the state. The Forum develops a statewide listing of early childhood services, consumer education materials in a variety of languages and formats, including the brochure "See It Through Your Child's Eyes," and outreach programs to help families locate and afford quality child care.

Several states have designed consumer education initiatives targeted to the needs of certain families, such as those with school-age children or families of children with special needs. Often, these are collaborative efforts with partners from other state agencies, community agencies, schools, health care providers and other service agencies.

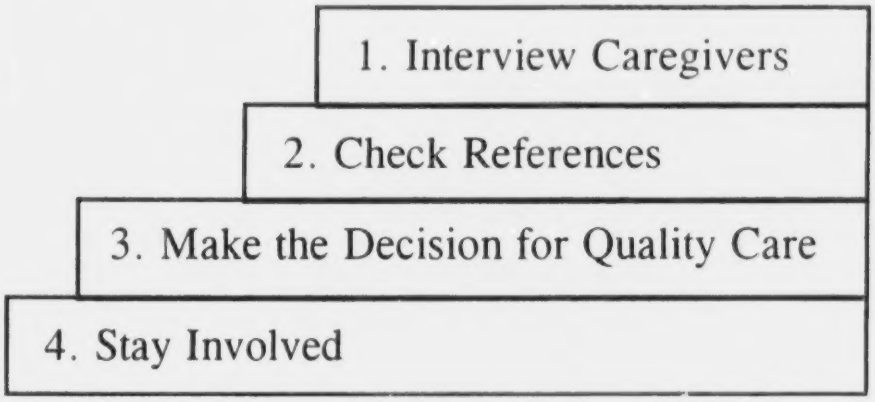
COLORADO Options for Inclusive Child Care, administered by the Colorado Office of Resource and Referral Agencies, is a project designed to increase the awareness of child care resource and referral agencies (R&Rs) of the issues that impact families of children and youth with special needs, and to assist R&Rs to develop strategies that support families in building partnerships with child care and respite care worke . . The project will build the capacity of community agencies to act as a catalyst in promoting community involvement in inclusive child care and increase community utilization of R&Rs for recruiting, training, and supporting providers of child care and respite services. Services for families and providers include problem solving when care options are limited or non-existent, tips on interviewing and contracting, and help in identifying barriers to inclusion specific to each care setting.

Child Care 2000, a broad collaborative in WASHINGTON coordinated by the Washington State Child Care Resource and Referral Network and involving 14 statewide early childhood and youth organizations, 4 state agencies, the Child Care Coordinating Committee, is a consumer education and parent engagement campaign to inform parents about the importance of quality adult caregiving relationships for children and youth of all ages. One of the lessons learned during the campaign has been that one message does not fit all parents' situations. Child Care 2000 developed a message to the parents of school-agers that is relevant to the complexities involved in the process of choosing an appropriate place for their school-age child. A positive message was chosen which grabs parents' attention: School Age Care: Growing Up With Someplace To Go.

Reaching Parents through child care consumer education is a vital step in the process of ensuring that families have access to the best possible child care services for their children. Responsive consumer education strengthens the child care delivery system and enables parents, providers and communities to work together to identify and address their child care needs.

There are many examples in states and local communities of effective consumer education initiatives. As states continue to address the growing need for child care services, consumer education will be the mechanism for sharing information with families, providing essential support and connecting families with the services they need.

Four Steps for Parents Selecting a Child Care Provider



National Organizations

National Organizations

The following organizations have information and resources for states, families and communities.

Child Care Action Campaign
330 7th Avenue, 17th Floor
New York, NY 10001
(212) 239-0138

Children's Defense Fund
25 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001
(202) 628-8787
World Wide Web: http://www.childrensdefense.org

Families and Work Institute
330 Seventh Avenue, 14th Floor
New York, NY 10001
(212) 465-2044
World Wide Web: http://www.familiesandworkinst.org

I Am Your Child
(888) 447-3400
http://www.iamyourchild.org

National Association for the Education of Young Children
1509 16th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036
(800) 424-2460 or (202) 232-8777
World Wide Web: http://www.naeyc.org/naeyc

National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies
1319 F Street, NW, Suite 606
Washington, DC 20004-1106
(202) 393-5501
World Wide Web: http://www.childcarerr.org

National Black Child Development Institute
1023 Fifteenth Street, NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 387-1281
World Wide Web: http://www.nbcdi.org

National Child Care Information Center
243 Church Street, NW 2nd Floor
Vienna, VA 22180
(800) 616-2242 ***(List of state child care administrators available)***
World Wide Web: http://nccic.org

National Parent Information Network
University of Illinois Children's Research Center
51 Gerty Drive
Champaign, IL 61820-7469
(800) 583-4135 or (217) 333-1386
World Wide Web: http://npin.org

Zero To Three/National Center for Clinical Infant Programs
734 15th Street, NW, 10th Floor
Washington, DC 20005-2101
(202) 638-1144
World Wide Web: http://www.zerotothree.org

CHILD CARE AWARE

A **toll-free phone number** provides parents with a direct link to their community child care resource and referral agency:

800-424-2246

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